

Blog posts

Brussels requires a strong stomach

A BRUSSELS DIARY: PART 2

Ahead of the European elections on 22 May, Betto van Waarden describes the daily routine of decision-making in Brussels.

Exclusive 13 May, by Betto van Waarden

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A diplomat of the Permanent Representation of the Netherlands to the EU once admitted to me and other trainees that his country was not the most strategic in European negotiations. Dutch attachés are quick to raise their “flag” (a sign with country name) in order to take the floor at meetings of the Council of the EU, and then neatly pass on their instructions from The Hague to other member states, which are waiting for the right moment to spin the discussion to their advantage.

An Italian diplomat explained his national style to me: “At the start of the meeting, you raise an issue that you don’t really care about, with lots of hoo-ha, which other member states will then discuss excitedly for the next three hours. By the time northern member states start longing for lunch, around 1–1.30, you say ‘why don’t we just drop that earlier point, but still make one minor change in the following paragraph of the legal text...’ Out of hunger, Germany and the Netherlands then suddenly give in without a question to what has been Italy’s greatest wish from the start.” Perhaps it’s not surprising that cultural differences and eating habits play a role at meetings between member states. But what about meetings among the EU institutions?

Once states have established the position of the Council on a proposal from the European Commission, the state holding the Presidency of the Council starts negotiating with the Commission and Parliament. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and Committee of the Regions (CoR) sometimes issue their opinions on the proposal. But the three main institutions seem to regard the EESC and CoR as cute little discussion groups—anyone without real power in Brussels is not taken seriously.

During the first “trilogues”—negotiations between Commission, Council, and Parliament—technical and non-controversial disagreements are usually solved. All parties postpone giving in on more controversial issues for as long as possible. Sometimes the Council and Parliament even meet secretly to agree on matters ahead of the next negotiation with the Commission, thereby infuriating my Commission colleagues. Pressure to reach an agreement on a policy proposal mounts. The deadline becomes Judgment Day. Two, in principle final, trilogues were on my agenda for new EU programmes, Erasmus+ (education) and Horizon 2020 (research and innovation). My colleagues and I expected little movement in the Erasmus+ negotiation, a €14 billion programme, since disagreements between the European Commissioner for education and culture and the Chair of the European Parliament Committee on culture and education were referred to as the “battle of the divas” by Council colleagues. During the trilogue it turned out that the Commissioner and Chair had already made a deal by telephone, so the final negotiation became a 45-minute play in which all parties again re-enacted their disagreements before putting the Commissioner–Chair deal on the table and congratulating each other on the magnificent result. In a corner of the negotiation room after, a protesting French Europarlamentarian was brushed aside by a beaming German Europarlamentarian with a “Je n’ai pas imposé, j’ai négocié” (“I did not push my political standpoint, I just did what I had to during the negotiations”).

Later that day the Horizon 2020 trilogue kicked off. The Commission, Council and Parliament assured each other they would go on to the bitter end to reach an agreement, given the pressure from media and universities to clarify the EU research budget (€70 billion) for the next seven years. The negotiation illustrated the differences between the institutions: the Commission’s technocrats knew their own proposal the best and tried to trump the others with superior expert knowledge; the Council Presidency’s seasoned Irish diplomats never lost their cool (despite nightly negotiations during the last weeks of their Presidency) and always acted politely but strategically; and the Parliament’s pure-blood politicians were masters at spinning and political games.

The food strike tactics of the Italian didn’t apply to my meeting since the trilogue started at 4pm and assistants went for bags of sandwiches, cookies and chips to be shared around the conference table. I couldn’t eat most of them (gluten allergy) but I had a banana and energy bar to carry me through. Around 11pm, my immediate colleagues and I were still waiting on the windowsill of the room without any interpretation of what was being said, because our colleagues from DG Research and Innovation were taking care of the first half of the agenda and there weren’t enough seats and interpretation headsets. Hunger struck. At midnight I decided to eat leftover rice in an old yoghurt container I had on me, until I realised I didn’t have a spoon. I went to the toilet to eat the rice with my fingers in private, but on the way found a used

coffee cup with a spoon, which I washed. Then I ate my big container of rice with the tiny coffee spoon, in the negotiating room, as a Belgian Europarliamentarian screamed and walked away in anger, a German Europarliamentarian accused the Commission of lying, and the mood alternated between joviality and hostility.

At three in the morning, the negotiation was suspended due to remaining disagreements. Eleven hours of waiting on the windowsill and our education points hadn't even been mentioned.

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